

The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)

Let's plant seeds downtown

Thu Sep 12 2013

Page: C7

Section: C

Byline: KAREN PINCHIN Commentary

Walking across the parking lot of the old Marysville cotton mill, this woman was all business.

Her dark hair was in a stylish bob, her navy skirt suit was immaculate, and her patent leather high heels clicked against the pavement. But it was the four huge lettuces in her arms that caught my eye.

Over the past two years, nearly 100 Fredericton residents have had the pleasure of growing vegetables in community garden plots across the city, with 10 on an official waiting list and many more waiting in the wings.

Some are government workers, like the beautiful woman with her armful of lettuce, while some are residents from multicultural communities. Many are children, and some live in apartments and don't have greenspace of their own.

So why, with incredibly vibrant and growing community garden plots in Marysville and at St. Mary's Anglican Church, has one yet to spring up in downtown Fredericton?

In full disclosure, I moved here with my Fredericton-born husband about a year ago, so I'm relatively new to what has apparently been a longtime debate. When we bought our northside home, we immediately built six large raised garden beds for my cucumbers, tomatoes, kale,

carrots and herbs. I've been feasting since July.

In Vancouver, where we lived for the previous five years, it was normal to find community gardens in unconventional spaces, from vacant commercial sites to abandoned railway tracks to an entire swath of Vancouver's city hall, which has been taken over by a beautiful patchwork of raised beds full of well-kept vegetable plants and edible flowers. The gardens are so popular that some people spend years on a waiting list to score a four-foot by eight-foot bed near their homes.

According to Edee Klee, co-chair of New Brunswick Community Harvest Gardens (NBCHG), the group that spearheaded the St. Mary's and Marysville plots, bringing a community garden to the city's downtown has been complicated. Much of Fredericton's drinking water comes from the downtown wellfields, where lots are zoned from A to C, depending on their importance to the aquifer. Unfortunately, the province considers community gardens to be agricultural operations, which are not allowed under the Wellfield Protection Program, so finding space has been a challenge.

Other downtown sites, not on wellfield land, have been suggested, including the lawns of the new YMCA, land around the small craft aquatic centre near Smythe and Woodstock - although that is apparently

"flood-prone" and not up for grabs - and inside the racetrack at the exhibition grounds. Even raised beds at the abandoned gas station beside the Sunshine Diner have been proposed.

Klee says they're ideally looking for a site at least 100 feet square with access to a roof so they can capture rainwater. "We want to bring gardens to people, not the other way around. That's why we're looking for locations that are within walking distance of high-density, low-income areas in our downtown core."

I'm not an urban planner, a city councillor or an activist. But I love my vegetable garden, and want people who can't afford their own homes, people who would probably benefit most from the amazing pleasure of growing their own food, to have a chance to love theirs as well.

What will it take? Will a business with a downtown plot of land that's gathering dust offer it to NBCHG as a pilot project? Do you know of a large and unused plot of land somewhere downtown that's not in the wellfield zone? If so, you should email info@nbchg.org.

It's in everyone's best interest to get Fredericton a downtown community garden. All we need to do is be flexible, creative and collaborative, and the resulting benefits will flow from there.

Karen Pinchin is a Fredericton-based freelance journalist who writes for The Globe and Mail, Maclean's and The Walrus. She's also the newest volunteer at Greener Village Community Food Centre, which is a strong supporter of NBCHG.

© 2013 The Daily Gleaner (Fredericton)